

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
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Cast All Your Anxiety on God

1 Peter 5:1-11

"Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you" (v. 7). It's one of those verses that fits nicely on a PowerPoint slide, all by itself. It's easy to memorize, without necessarily having to take all the other words around it and file those in your head as well. No wonder this is a piece of Scripture so cherished in the minds and hearts of many believers. It flows easily off the lips, especially in the King James Version: "Casting all your care upon him, for he careth for you."

But like so many other memorable pieces of Scripture, this one has a context. And as with them, so with this one, context is key. We can't faithfully and fully understand what this single verse is about without paying careful attention to what's around it.

The main thing around it is humility. For one thing, humility toward others in the household of faith. "All of you," says Peter, "cloth yourselves with humility toward one another" (v. 5b). Not simply because it helps facilitate healthy relationships in the congregation, but mainly because reciprocal respect is in keeping with the will and judgment of God. To underscore this fact, Peter quotes Proverbs 3:34. "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" (v. 5b).

Then Peter traces this humility toward fellow believers to its root, namely, humility before God. "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time" (v. 6). So humility, a sense of submission to God's will, and a willingness to curb our own sinful and selfish desires, is supposed to be our fundamental posture in life. We're called to live with a steady awareness of our dependence on our Creator, and with constant trust in his power to care for us.

Then, as part of this call to humility, comes the exhortation to cast our anxiety on God. Part of what can throw us off in this text is the punctuation between verses 6 and 7. In the NIV, and probably in some other translations as well, there's a period at the end of verse 6. Verse 7 is thus treated as a new sentence. This leads us to believe there's a strict break between the two verses, so that we end up hearing them as two separate pieces of thought, addressing two at least slightly different subjects.

But in the original Greek, there's no break between verses 6 and 7. Verse 7 doesn't really start a new sentence. It's actually part of the sentence that begins in verse 6, and continues Peter's thinking about humility. Long story short, instead of reading, "Humble yourselves. Cast your anxiety on God," it's more helpful to read, "Humble yourselves, casting your anxiety on God." That way, it becomes even clearer that casting our anxiety on God is part of humility. In other words, you don't first humble yourself, and then as a separate step, cast your anxiety on God. Rather, you cast your anxiety on God as part of the process of humbling yourself.

I know it may sound like I'm being real picky or technical, but I think it helps us to see the importance of this link between humility and anxiety. I'm guessing that you would rather have more of the former and less of the latter. And I believe that today's Scripture passage can help us move in that direction.

It's understandable that Peter would want to help his fellow believers deal with the anxiety of being faithful disciples. Remember that this was a young church in a hostile environment. These believers weren't going through anxiety in spite of their commitment to following Jesus. Rather, they were going through anxiety because of their commitment to following Jesus. True, they experienced a certain peace about their future, the hope of glory, because of what God had already accomplished in the death and resurrection of Christ. But these disciples also faced the harsh realities of trouble in the present because their faith had united them with a Savior who suffered. They should therefore expect to go through trials as well.

In our own context, many of the anxieties we struggle with certainly aren't identical to the troubles that the recipients of Peter's letter were going through. In fact, I think that many of the anxieties we face come more from not following Jesus than from diligently practicing his way for our lives. And yet I believe that the call to humility, which includes casting our anxiety on God, still applies. While we wait for the Lord's appearing, and live as God's people in the midst of a world in need of redemption, we still need to stand firm in our faith. We still need to grow in our reliance on God's care for us.

There's a scene in an episode of *The Bob Newhart Show* where Bob, a psychologist, is talking to a woman who has come for her first visit. Bob begins by explaining how he bills—five dollars for the first five minutes, and then nothing after that. The woman is thrilled. Bob assures her the session won't go over five minutes. The woman begins by explaining that she fears being buried alive in a box. When Bob asks her to say more, she describes how this fear extends to other things—being in tunnels, elevators, houses, cars, “anything boxy.” “So basically you're saying you're claustrophobic?” says Bob. “Yes, that's what I'm saying,” she replies.

This whole exchange takes about two minutes. Then Bob takes another ten seconds or so to empathize with her—how awful it must be to live with this fear. “It's horrible,” the woman says. “All right,” says Bob, “I'm going to give you two words that I think will clear up everything. Just take these two words and integrate them into your daily life, and you should be fine.” The woman is excited, and asks if she should write them down. “Oh, you can if you like,” he says. “But most people have no trouble remembering them.” “Okay,” she says, leaning forward. “You ready?” asks Bob. “Yes,” she says. “Okay, here are the two words.” Bob leans across his desk to put his face close to hers, and says, “Stop it!”¹

Surely there's more to dealing with anxiety than just being told to stop it. Though there's certainly an element of human choice involved, Peter doesn't just tell his anxious and fearful brothers and sisters that he has two words for them: “Stop it!” No, Peter goes further. He tells them that harboring anxiety undermines humility, and when humility breaks down, Christian community breaks down. And the last thing God's people need is to be divided and distracted. That's just the kind of thing the devil loves. He's always on the lookout for any opportunity to devour and destroy.

Peter tells his fellow believers that instead of living in anxiety about what might happen to them if they stay the course with Jesus, they need to let go and let God. “Humble yourselves, casting all your anxiety on God because he cares for you.” So Peter doesn't just

say, "Stop it," or "Don't do this." He also says, "Do this." And the "this" is pretty straightforward. "Cast all your anxiety on God."

Peter uses a strong expression here. The Greek word for "cast" appears only one other time in the New Testament. In Luke 19:35, the disciples have been sent to get a donkey for Jesus to ride on. Luke says, "They brought it to Jesus, threw their cloaks on the colt and put Jesus on it." So the term for "cast" means "to throw upon." That's what we're supposed to do with our anxieties and worries, throw them upon God, and let God bear them for us. When you do that, you're practicing and exhibiting humility. You're acknowledging your dependence upon God. You're demonstrating that you're not self-sufficient and capable of handling these things entirely on your own.

By contrast, when you cling to your anxieties and refuse to place your worries in God's hands, you're claiming a kind of self-sovereignty, instead of acknowledging and relying upon God's sovereignty. You're attempting to maintain control yourself, rather than relinquishing matters to God and trusting that he's somehow in control. You're practicing pride, not humility. And most of all, you're thinking and acting as if God doesn't care, as if God doesn't notice our lives, with all their trials and troubles.

"O you of little faith," says Jesus to his disciples, then and now. "So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'" (Matt. 6:30-31). Don't the questions just keep on coming, at least in our fearful imaginations? What will happen to me if . . . ? What if I lose my job? What if the biopsy comes back malignant? What if my house goes into foreclosure? What if I fail this class? What if my spouse dies? What if I end up in court? What if I'm in a car accident? What if my parents get divorced? What if . . . ? There are probably lots of ways that you would finish that question at this point in your life and experience. As a friend of mine recently emphasized, in the midst of the unknown, the uncertain, your imagination can be all over the place. What if . . . ?

But a life drowning in and driven by "What ifs" is incompatible with humility. Instead of dwelling on potential trials and possible scenarios that would seem to contradict the sovereignty of God, humility chooses to focus on God's purposes and God's promises. Humility constantly reaffirms that God isn't indifferent to our needs and problems, that God really does care.

Late last year, Micha Boyett blogged about her young son's fears and her inability to calm them through reason. She wrote:

Every season has its obsessions and concerns. While his fascination with volcanoes at age three had him spouting off facts about Pompeii like a tiny adult, his fear developed right alongside his love of knowledge. Last fall, after his kindergarten class practiced an earthquake drill, he switched from volcanoes to earthquakes and we worked through his ever-growing fear of earthquakes for months. My son's late night terrors would wake him and he would wake us, crying in fear of a future earthquake. Night after night of three am wake up cries and earthquake conversations, my husband and I would try to keep our cool. We'd whisper the same things we whisper now:

God is here. Mommy and Daddy are here. We will always take care of you. We're sleeping nearby and we'll help you if there's an earthquake. God loves you and you are safe.

We live in San Francisco. We can't avoid the reality that an earthquake will come. And it will probably be a big one. And what are God's promises to us when it does come?

God loves us. God is with us.

Sometimes I'm not sure what else to say.²

Sometimes that is what we most need to hear, especially when trials make it hard to follow the way of Jesus and stand firm in the faith. We need to hear: God loves you. God is with you. God cares. And because he cares, cast all your anxiety on him. Now I know that's easier said than done. I wish I had a nickel for every time someone has told me that they gave their worries and fears over to God, especially through prayer, but eventually "took them back" in some form or another. In other words, they let go and let God, trusting him to handle the situation, but only for a little while. I'm not saying that as we place our worries in God's hands, there's nothing left for us as human beings to do. There may very well be further things that you're responsible for doing as part of God's work in that particular situation. Ultimately, though, it will need to be just that, God's work, and not your own, that produces the outcome God desires.

This is why we have Scripture passages like today's from 1 Peter. Because we, like those early believers, need regular exhortation to keep laying our anxieties on God. And God has given us many ways and resources for doing so. He has given us prayer, through which we turn to him with our cares. He has given us the Scriptures, in which we have his precious and trustworthy promises. He has given us worship, by which we bring our worries into his presence. He has given us the church, in which we share our lives with people who help us bear our burdens, and who show us that God cares by the way that they care. "Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time, casting all your anxiety on him because he cares for you."

¹ From Mark Buchanan, *Your Church Is Too Safe* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012) 88-89. At <<http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2012/april/6043012.html>>.

² "When I Can't Calm My Sons Fears," a guest post at Thin Places, a blog by Amy Julia Becker. Christianity Today website. November 14, 2014. Accessed July 23, 2015 <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/amyjuliabecker/2014/november/when-i-cant-calm-my-sons-fears.html>>.